

Depression in teens — which is different than feeling depressed — can be tricky to identify

Recognizing whether your teen is experiencing depression is often challenging. Simply deciphering adolescent behavior on a daily basis can be tricky at best. The screen staring, hormone surging, easily-anoyed-with-you child/adult who inhabits your home is not likely the most open about how he/she is feeling. On the flip side, you may have a teen who errs on the dramatic side and ALWAYS lets you know how terrible their Day. Life. Existence. Is.

Adolescence is also a developmental stage filled with positive moments during which parents get positive glimpses of the young adult their son or daughter is becoming.

What, then, does depression look like in teenagers? For starters, it is important to distinguish between a depressed mood and depression the disorder. A depressed mood is something that most people experience at some point. It is typically due to some sort of stressor related to family, peer relationships or school. Adolescents are more susceptible to this type of mood (which can also present as irritability) due to hor-

mone changes, poor eating or sleeping habits and the many social stressors that can occur.

The life of a teen has many ups and downs. Your child may burst into tears on occasion for no reason or be really grumpy for a few days. There may be a night or two your child cannot fall asleep well or has difficulty rising in the morning. This does not necessarily signal there is depression at hand.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association identifies symptoms that might indicate depression. Depression is diagnosed when at least five of the symptoms occur for most of the day every day for two weeks or more:

- sad or irritable mood
- little or no interest in pleasurable or favorite activities
- difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping
- seeming restless or as if being



Alisa Messana
On mental health

slowed down

- fatigue
- feelings of worthlessness; excessive or inappropriate guilt
- decreased ability to think or concentrate; indecisiveness
- recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal ideation, suicide attempt or plan

A depressed mood can look like any of the above, usually with less intensity and shorter duration.

The signs are not always straightforward. Use of substances, problems with school, acting out at home or an increase in risky behaviors can also be the way in which your child is letting you know something is not quite right. Even the high functioning, involved adolescent can suffer from depression. Teenagers sometimes don't have the language to articulate what they are feeling and might not realize they are depressed.

What should you do if you suspect your teen is depressed? Keep a journal of signs you notice and their

duration. This will help you understand whether your teen is experiencing a depressed mood or depressive disorder. Familiarize yourself with any family history of depression, knowing it may not appear as such. Talk with your child about what you've observed. Remember to let your teen guide if he/she is ready to talk. Bedtime and when you are together in the car can be good opportunities to approach conversation. Let your child know you care.

During adolescence, it's easy for parents to feel like their children don't need them as much. Teens do need their parents, just in a different capacity. Seek the help of a therapist or contact your pediatrician to recommend one. Lastly, remain calm and have hope! Depression is a disorder of the brain, not a character weakness, and is very treatable. For additional information, Erika's Lighthouse has a free parent handbook on depression at erikaslighthouse.org.

— *Alisa Messana is a licensed clinical social worker and a Hinsdale resident.*